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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS) AND DRL (KLARMAN)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/21/2018
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: MINING REGION CALM BUT SURROUNDED

REF: A. [HTTP://YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=RJDHAYZQALG](http://youtube.com/watch?v=RJDHAYZQALG)
[B](#). TUNIS 362
[C](#). TUNIS 131

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Following months of protests, which erupted into violent confrontations between residents and security forces in early April, the southwestern mining town of Redeyef appeared calm during EmbOffs' April 18 visit. Residents reported that while large scale protests are unlikely to continue, unemployment remains a significant challenge for the region. The GOT has taken a number of steps to promote development in the Gafsa governorate, but also maintains a large security presence in the region. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Residents of the south western border towns of Redeyef and Um El Araies began protesting high unemployment and limited economic growth in the region in January 2008 (Ref B). The protests were sparked when the Gafsa Phosphate Company (GPC), the region's largest employer, announced the majority of new hires would come from outside the governorate. When the new employees reported to work in April, large demonstrations broke out in Redeyef and many residents were temporarily detained by security forces (Ref B). Video of the clashes, which was uploaded to YouTube (which is blocked in Tunisia, but can be accessed via proxy servers), shows hundreds of Redeyef residents taking to the town's main thoroughfare to protest the region's economic challenges (Ref A). Men, women and children shouted anti-government slogans like, "Hey police, hey cowards, show your face in the square!" and carried signs including one that read, "The people's money is in palaces and the people's children are in tents."

[1](#)3. (SBU) During the disturbances in early April, the GOT deployed security forces to the region and blocked the road into Redeyef to non-local traffic. EmbOffs traveling in Gafsa on April 17-18 saw a significant security presence in the governorate, including buses filled with security forces with riot gear heading in the direction of Redeyef, counterterrorism unit personnel, and a large number of National Guard vehicles. At a checkpoint on the northern road (Route 201) into Um El Araies and Redeyef, EmbOffs were told they could not continue because of "disturbances" in the region. Two National Guard officials and one plainclothes official detoured EmbOffs to another route which was "better for your security."

[1](#)4. (SBU) Tourist guides in the region told EmbOffs that the southern road (Route 16) to Redeyef through Tameghza was also blocked to all but local traffic. However, the two National Guard checkpoints on the route were not manned, and EmbOffs visited Redeyef on April 18. The town, which is located in

the southern desert near the Algerian border and has about 30,000 residents, appeared peaceful and was bustling for a region that is remote and often desolate. Residents told EmbOffs that unemployment was the root of the recent troubles, particularly as some people were getting jobs based on their fathers' rank (in the military or security forces). (Note: We have also heard rumors that some of the new hires may have bought their positions, while labor sources report individuals were hired from around Tunisia as part of a national employment initiative.) Although their comments may have been meant to reassure, residents said that the troubles of the previous weeks were largely over. Noticeably, the visible police presence in the town was significantly less than usual in Tunisia, and EmbOffs only saw one uniformed police officer during their two hour stay in the town. However, almost twenty security vehicles, including large buses, minivans and SUVs loaded with security personnel, were staged north of town.

15. (C) The relative calm may be evidence that the GOT has finally attempted to address the economic discontent in the region. A senior labor contact told LabOff on April 17 that the GOT had quietly unveiled a number of initiatives to spur economic development in Gafsa, including planning the construction of two new plants (concrete and wiring) and doubling the 11th Development Plan (2007 - 2011) allocation for the governorate. The initiatives were not announced publicly, although there was limited press coverage, because the GOT did not want to be seen as responding to protesters' demands. Nevertheless, news of the economic initiatives is spreading in the governorate, and the result seems to be a calming in the region, at least temporarily.

16. (C) Comment: While the GOT continues the media spin that all is well in the region, new governor Mohamed Chaieb seems to be taking a proactive approach to the problem. Although word of the protests is only now spreading to Tunis, residents of other towns in the Gafsa governorate agree that the problems of unemployment and economic development are real and disturbing and were aware of events in Redeyef. Given rising economic pressures in 2008, it seems likely that people will continue to demand that the GOT take tangible steps to promote economic growth and wealth distribution around the country. End Comment.

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